

Conversations in the Hive - Dana Sawyer

What follows is a lightly edited version of a Zoom conversation with Dana Sawyer, professor emeritus of religious studies and world religions at the Maine College of Art & Design and an adjunct professor in Asian Religions at the Chaplaincy Institute of Maine.

The video may be found at:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKBs6D549xGsJVRKl1rslZw>

and at:

<https://srm.news/hive/>

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Many thanks to David Laird for transcribing.

Q. We know you've spent much time in India and have developed expertise in the nature of Shankara Sampradaya (a spiritual line of masters and their disciples) that TM calls the Holy Tradition. Could you describe for us what that is and how it exists today?

A. Shankara is reputed to have formed four Vidyapeeths, four seats of knowledge, at the cardinal points of India, and those are still very much up and alive today that tradition is called the Shankara Sampradaya: the sect of Shankara. The important part to know is that he started ten sects, ten subsects of sanyassins called the dasnamis, the ten names, and most TMers that I talk to have heard of that. What happened over time was that some of these branches died out or morphed or changed in many ways. So for example Shankara was a Dandi Swami because he carried a stick (danda), and so all of these ten dasnamis were originally stick-carrying Dandis. But over time that changed. Parts of the parampara (tradition) died out and so today there are only four groups left who can take the danda and hold the danda. Now that doesn't mean that all of the other six completely died out. It means that in some ways they were changed or corrupted, and so in the Shankara Sampradaya as it exists in India today there are basically three groups of sanyassins. There are the Dandis, which are considered the most rudiwadi, which means orthodox, because they carry the danda just as did Shankara. But there are also what are called Paramahansas. Now Dandis can only be drawn from the Brahmin caste, but Paramahansas can be drawn from any of the three twice-born castes. There is also a very interesting group called the Naga Babas, who often smear themselves with the ashes from the cremation grounds and have very long dreadlocks. The Naga Babas can also be drawn from the Sudra caste. So these

three - Dandis, Paramahansas and Nagas - are all up and running in the Shankara Sampradaya today.

Q. How would you then describe the place of the Shankaracharyas themselves in that tradition, in that construct you've just described?

A. The Shankaracharyas are the nominal heads of the entire Sampradaya. I say nominal, because not really. The way it works is that the Shankaracharyas especially should be guiding all of the Dandis, since they share absolute orthodoxy in common. But quite a long time ago in this book - *Living Banaras* - I wrote a chapter based on field research I had done over several visits to India, and what I found was that the Shankaracharyas in fact have very little influence over any of the Sampradaya. The Dandis, the Paramahansas and the Naga Babas are much more likely to follow the will of their Diksha Guru, their initiation Guru, or their Vidya Guru, the guru that they study primarily with. Sometimes they can't even name who the Shankaracharyas are, even the one in their local region. That great American philosopher Yogi Berra once said that in theory, theory and practice are the same, but in practice they ain't. That's exactly the case in this case.

Q. What's the significance of the stick that the Dandis carry?

A. The shortcut answer is it's kind of like a wedding band or a string tied around the finger that reminds you of an oath you've made, so they have to carry the stick wherever they go. It's not a walking stick. In fact, it can't touch the ground without ritual pollution, so they have to hold it up like a banner before them all the time. You may have seen that at the top of Swami Brahmananda's danda there is what looks like a little orange flag, and in that is his sacred thread as a Brahmin. Only Dandis can be Brahmins. They take the thread off when they go through diksha, and it's placed in that flag at the top of the danda.

Q. How does the current TM movement relate to the Holy Tradition that the Shankara Sampradaya represents?

A. That's a good question. It's a complex question in ways. The short answer is: directly. If you are chanting the puja at a TM initiation, you're chanting that lineage, so you're claiming direct connection with the Shankara Sampradaya and the "Holy Tradition". Now on another level: not at all. What I mean by that is that the TM movement isn't recognized in any way by the Shankara Sampradaya. If we go there, then we're not encouraged to participate. We're not recognized in any formal kind of a way. And when I say "we", I mean Westerners. The same was true for me. They just recognize me as this weird guy who followed them around with cameras and tape recorders.

Q. How would Maharishi have been received if he was still alive right now. How would he have been received as part of the tradition?

A. Originally, fine. Good relationship. A Kayastha - low-caste person - in a respectful relationship with the Sampradaya. Sudras are allowed to participate, but given the history of events that occurred, he's definitely more than an outsider, but thought of as a pariah.

Q. So are we being honest if we are claiming to be part of that tradition?

A. One thing to say is there's no central authority in Hinduism, so there's nothing like a pope, and consequently people often go rogue in a wide variety of ways. In many ways Hindus prefer it that way, because nobody "captures the flag", so to speak, so groups break away and new groups form. Everybody's heard of Swami Vivekananda, a member of the Ramakrishna Mission, and that was a brand new sect of swamis and sadhus who came on the scene. So these things happen.

Q. You mentioned events that happened. What were they?

A. You mean relative to the distance of Maharishi from the tradition? Maharishi couldn't become a swami or a Dandi or the Shankaracharya because of his caste. As a brahmachari he would have no authority to teach, no formal authority. But as I just said, it's a common thing for people to go out and talk, and if they have some charisma and if they have some knowledge, then people will gather around them and may accept them as a guru, or something like that. But one thing that they take offense at - and I've heard this over and over again - is whether we call it a donation or a payment, to ask for money for the teachings is absolutely forbidden in every way. The Dandi sanyassins when they go out to beg, first of all they don't accept money, they only accept food and things like that. They're not even allowed to touch money, so that very much bothers them. Then the other parts of it are that he stood behind, and threw money behind, the claim to the gaddi, the throne of Shantananda, and all of the Shankaracharyas of the Nyayapeeths, which are the four formal peeths, have opposed Shantananda as a Shankaracharya. That also has caused a lot of problems, primarily I've got to say, for the laity, because as I said, the Dandis just follow their own gurus. But the Shankaracharyas come out for religious festivals, and if it's broadcast that a Shankaracharya is going to be at a religious festival, people come out for their blessing. It's caused confusion about who is the Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math, and a lot of that confusion has been caused directly by Maharishi.

Q. Would that reputation still apply to what we know as the Indian movement, the SRM in its two forms in India today?

A. Yeah, they wouldn't be legitimated by the Shankaracharya of their local region. Not that they need to care really, because the Shankaracharyas don't really carry a lot of weight and authority over the Sampradaya.

Q. In the everyday life with the work with schools and so on, I presume the Dandis would not get involved with that, and hence what we know as the SRM would hold weight in that area.

A. No, they wouldn't participate in any way.

Q. How does the meditation practice they impart relate to the TM that we know and have known for 50 years?

A. As I was traveling around on my many trips, first on a foreign language and area studies grant from the US Department of Education, I was particularly interested in how their monastic structure - I mean specifically the Dandi Sanyassins - exists today in India, because earlier treatments and descriptions of that structure were outdated. It was an academic project. But as I was traveling around - remember, I had been an initiator and a governor, I had been in the TM movement for 13 or 14 years - I had a curiosity: do they meditate the same way that I was trained to meditate? Maharishi claimed to come out of this tradition, so in a very ad hoc fashion as I would travel around, from time to time I would meet a swami who would say to me: "Well, I am now going to go meditate." And I would say to myself: "Oh, I wonder if he's going to do the same thing that that I learned?" And so without revealing that I had been involved in the TM movement - and if I did say I was involved in the TM movement, that was usually something that would close the door. There wouldn't be an opportunity to continue interviews. They would just "Okay, bye!" So they didn't know what I did, or if I did anything, and I would say: "Would you teach me to meditate? Would you teach me your technique?" And they would very often.

Over the years I would say anywhere between 15 and 20 times I was taught how to meditate. Sometimes a puja would be done, sometimes a puja wouldn't be done. But cutting to the chase, I was taught in the same way that I had learned to meditate from Rick Archer. When I say that, what I mean is I was taught to do mantra japa, mantra repetition, effortlessly. Even when one of them would say to me: "Focus on the mantra. Concentrate on the mantra", I would jump in and say: "Oh, you mean keep all my attention on it. Focus on it very closely and don't ever let it go?" "No, no no. Don't do that." It would always be effortless repetition. "Think it easily and effortlessly, and if you drift

off it, come back to it, and your time wasn't wasted while you drifted off." That was consistently the message.

I will say this wasn't an academic analysis. I wasn't preparing to write a PhD thesis on the subject. But in all of the cases in which I was taught - three times by Shankaracharyas - it was always effortless repetition of the mantra.

Generally the breakdown in use of a mantra repetition is what is called by the Dandis either vachika or manasika. Vachika means out loud, manasika means mental repetition. In both cases, the repetition is effortless. Vachika for example can take place as a kirtan, and lots of people have chanted kirtan, and probably quite a few people watching right now. I would ask you when you chanted kirtan, did they ask you to concentrate very hard on the mantras or chant kirtan. Effortless repetition of mantra is very common whether it's vachika (out loud) or manasika (mental repetition), so I wasn't ultimately surprised that it was effortless.

Q. With their structure of teaching, how did it relate to our three days of checking, our checking notes and so on?

A. Not very well. Dandis are what are called Ramta Sanyassins, which means they move around a lot. Sometimes I would move around with them, and sometimes I would hang out at monasteries where they would stop by from time to time. They're like monk motels with Dandis coming and going. Because I was coming and going, and they were coming and going, there wasn't a lot of elaborate checking like we see with TM. They would check the mantra, and they would check: "Are you doing it effortlessly?" And that was usually it, a day or two later. Sometimes they would ask me about my experiences if I bumped into them again.

Q. We can assume this structure that was put in place came through Maharishi's efforts in bringing it to the West?

A. We know from the history of the TM movement itself. I remember from conversations I had with Jerry Jarvis that that was a structure that got worked out over time. Part of it probably was - I don't mean to sound cynical - not only to make sure people were doing it correctly, but to give them a course, in a sense that they were getting something for their money. I'm not being facetious when I say that.

Q. So we can safely assume then that Guru Dev would have been teaching this technique in the same way as the other Dandi swamis who you met?

A. Again, we're going outside my expertise. There's no way I can really know that, but my guess is yes. My guess is that it would be. Given that three

Shankaracharya taught me that way, I don't have any reason to believe he wouldn't have. And a couple people that taught me were people that had been direct diksha students, initiates, of Swami Brahmananda.

Q. So it's a reasonable inference. We know that Maharishi made changes to the mantras over the years. Can you talk about the mantras that you were given, and how they are selected compared to the way that you were taught by Maharishi on your teacher training course?

A. The dominant way - and I've witnessed this several times - is that the Dandis will ask a lay person who comes to them to learn meditation what their ishtadevata is: so who's your favourite deity? Is it Krishna? Is it Shiva? If it's Shiva, then they're likely given Om Namah Shivaya. So usually based on their ishtadevata, and if they're a Hindu and they don't have a favourite - they like them all! - then they might say: "What is your kuladevata?" What's your family devata traditionally? Then they'll give him a mantra related to that. Now I being a Westerner don't have an ishtadevata, so they would usually give me one of the mahavakyas - the great pronouncements like Aham Brahmasmi or Tat Twam Asi. One Dandi I remember gave me the mantra very simply Ram, which can mean Rama, but it also can be God, generically speaking.

Q. How important do you think that they thought the choice of mantra? Could the wrong choice slow you down?

A. They would believe that. Not so much based on personal selection, like age or gender for them in my experience. More like: "Oh well, if you're a Shiva devotee, then Om Namah Shivaya will be an easy fit for you. You'll resonate with this, literally and figuratively."

Q. We've heard that in some places they choose the ishtadevata based on your jyotish chart, your astrology chart. Did you run into that at all?

A. No, they never asked about my jyotish chart, which I had done in India, probably presuming that I didn't have one.

Q. So there's quite a range of mantras which they think are non-damaging? What we got from Maharishi was that if you use some wrong word like happiness, the vibratory quality of that could be damaging. But they seem to have from what you're saying quite a wide range of mantras that a person could use that would not be damaging.

A. Yes, exactly. Ekam Brahman is one that I got. About six years ago another old friend, an old initiator George Hardin and I were initiated by Swami Swarupananda Saraswati, a direct disciple of Swami Brahmananda, and that

was the mantra that he gave me. I bumped into TM initiators in India several times and talked with them, and I know they also base mantras very often on ishtadevata. I don't know how well that's known in the West, but I know that it goes on. Whether or not they also pay attention to gender or age, I don't know.

Q. The advanced techniques, all of these mantra extensions, did you ever come across them in your travels and initiations?

A. Never did. I didn't seek an advanced technique, so I can't say exactly what they would have said. I can say that when Swarupananda initiated George and I six years ago, he made a very clear point of saying that that was a mantra that Maharishi didn't know and wouldn't have been allowed to learn.

Q. You've obviously got a kitbag of mantras from your various initiations. How do you select which one to use?

A. I use the one Rick gave me. It's old friend and easy to use.

Q. How about the use of Om, which Maharishi forbade and also said that Guru Dev advised against for householders? Also, the mantras you mentioned didn't have a bija mantra in them as far as I understand. If you get a mantra from Amma for instance, she might give you Om Namah Shivaya, but she'll stick a bija mantra in the middle of it. What are your thoughts?

A. I was never given a bija mantra, and Om I was given regularly, usually Om Shanti.

Q. Have you heard this thing about Om making you a recluse? Is that well known in India, or did Maharishi just come up with that?

A. I've never heard that before except in the TM movement. It's very common for the laity to be given a mantra with Om in it. Very common.

Q. A topic that you touched on just briefly is Maharishi's authorization to bring out this knowledge. We have a mythology that was passed on to us about his relationship with Guru Dev and the time after Guru Dev passed away, how he got the title of Maharishi as he travelled around Southern India and communed with Mother Divine. Do you have any information to add about what happened in that time between Guru Dev's passing and when Maharishi basically hit the headlines in the West?

A. Not really. I was there to do academic study on the Dandis and because the Shankaracharyas are Dandis, some of that research overlapped with them. But I wasn't there to do research on Maharishi specifically. He really only comes

into the story when you're dealing with the dispute over the Shankaracharyaship. That's the only place where his name would come up.

Q. So he had a reputation there for his activism in selecting the Shankaracharya? Because as I understand it, there were even court cases.

A. Oh yeah. The Indian legal system is a whole topic of conversation. The litigation has gone on and on and began immediately. Within three weeks of the death of Swami Brahmananda they were two Shankaracharyas and so the war has gone on and on.

Q. Any idea of why? For that to happen so quickly, was there some unrest within the organization?

A. I'm very well aware of the problems and the gripes from the side of those who contested Shantananda's appointment, and those are clear. For instance, a will was produced in a very sketchy manner. All of a sudden there was this will. Nobody really in the close circle of devotees saw that will, and then suddenly here's this will, and it's claiming that Shantananda should be the next Shankaracharya. Why was it secretly brought to the court for legitimation? Why wasn't there a discussion about the will? Why wasn't the will revealed prior to Brahmananda's death? That was one cause for concern. And why it was so concerning for the opposition was that Shantananda was considered an unlikely candidate that the Mathamnaya - the text that describes what the qualifications for Shankara are - so many of those claimed that Shantananda didn't come up to snuff. Then a third concern that came up was that the two or three candidates who seemed most likely were not included in the will, and that also was considered a problem. So right out of the shoot, Krishna Bodhashram was made Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math, and the court cases began immediately.

Q. What was the ultimate outcome? Who is currently considered the legitimate Shankaracharya?

A. In 1833 the seat was vacated. There was nobody on the gaddi of Jyotir Math when Ramakrishna Ashrama passed away. Now, why that was true we don't really know historically. Some speculate there was no candidate who was worthy. Some say it was the Gorkha invasion from Nepal in the north. In 1941 Swami Gyanananda Saraswati reinvigorated enthusiasm for appointing a new Shankaracharya and he started a trust for Jyotir Math with the help of the Bharat Dharma Mahamandal in Benares. Now he (Gyanananda) was a Dandi, but he didn't feel himself worthy of the position of Shankaracharya, so he and the Mahamandal went to Swami Hariharanda Saraswati, often called Karpatri,

because he was the most respected Dandi in India at that time, even by the other Shankaracharyas. So they went to Karpatri and said: "Why don't you take the post?" Karpatri said: "I don't want to take the post, I'm very busy. But I would recommend that my guru, Swami Brahmananda, take the post. So Brahmananda took the post.

Now when Brahmananda died and the will was contested, the Bharat Dharma Mahamandal in Benares had reserved the right that if there had ever been a contest, or it was vague who would become the next Shankaracharya, they would have the right to choose the next Shankaracharya. The worry was not that it would be stolen away. The worry was that Brahmananda would die and again the seat would be empty. So they reserved that right. It's significant to note that Karpatri and the Mahamandal opposed Swami Shantananda and backed Krishna Bodhashram. When I say that's significant, I mean it's significant within the Shankara Sampradaya, and that is why the other Shankaracharyas of the Nyaya Vidyapeeths supported Krishna Bodhashram and after him Swami Swarupananda.

Q. This all happened when Maharishi was an unknown, because Guru Dev died in '53 and Maharishi hadn't built up substantial resources until years later. But we understand that Maharishi played quite a role in this, with supporting the court case in favour of Shantananda. Do you know why he did that? Was that in order that Shantanand would legitimize Maharishi? And when did Maharishi start to support Shantanand?

A. Well, I can't know Maharishi's mind. There's no way I can know what his intentions were. He's accused by the opponents of that lineage, of that particular parampara, as perhaps having had a hand in the will that they see as bogus. How they could possibly prove that I can't imagine, except to say that Maharishi was a Sudra, but he was of the Kayastha subcaste, which are scribes and secretaries, and he did some secretarial work reputedly for Swami Brahmananda. So who knows whether he had a hand in that or not?

Why did he support Shantananda? This is just guesswork, but legitimation does carry authority in India, so if I can stand up and say: "Oh, the Shankaracharya of New York has legitimated me as the best meditation teacher in Maine", Dana can now teach every squirrel on his property. It carries weight, and so for Maharishi as a Sudra, to have somebody behind you that's a Brahmin, a Dandi, a Shankaracharya, that would offer a lot of legitimation, even as Maharishi offered legitimation to us as TM teachers. People used to come to my lectures, and the poster always featured a picture of Maharishi. They came expecting to see the man!

Q. I see in the chat Phil Goldberg is asking: "Back to Om as a mantra. Have you experienced swamis who gave Om as a standalone, rather than as the first of a series? Just the single word Om.

A. Yep!

Q. Several people have noticed that you're using Sudra and Kayastha interchangeably. Our general understanding is that the four castes are Brahmin, and then Kayastha and then Vaishyas, the merchants, and Sudra, the servants. So Kayastha is not Sudra in the picture that we've been given.

A. That picture's wrong. It doesn't work like that. There are four broad castes: Brahmins, Kshatriyas - that's the warrior caste, or the princely caste. So kings and princes and ranis (queens), they're from the Kshatriya caste. Then there's the Vaishyas, the merchants. Then there's Sudras. Now inside of those four, there are dozens and dozens and scores of sub castes. For example, Vaishya is a merchant. I'm sure you've heard of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi literally means "grocer", so it's a merchant class subcaste. Kayastha is a subcaste of of Sudras.

Q. Where did the message come that Maharishi was Kshatriya then? Because that was always my understanding: that he was a warrior. And that was used to explain his coming to the West.

A. Frankly I've never heard that, so I really don't know where that came up. You remember the days when we were hanging out at ATRs? Somebody may have just mixed and matched. Don't know Sanskrit and misinterpreted - began with a K!

Q. I think we were told that "Kayastha" was the Hindi for the Sanskrit "Kshatriya". That's the message that got through, but that's [evidently] wrong. Are there any other techniques that the Dandis teach that we're not aware of that could be of use to us?

A. Not that come to mind. Dandis wander a lot. Men will usually take the danda after their wife dies, or at the last stage of life. So most Dandi Sanyassins are really old codgers like me, only with a few exceptions to that rule.

Q. They're not lifetime celibates?

A. No, not usually. Very, very rarely actually. I would say out of the 200 I've met, maybe six or eight were young and celibates all the way since brahmacharya. They wander, or when they become very infirm, they'll stay in their home monastery. But during the rainy season, they all come home for the rain retreat: they come home for a six-week ATR. I say that jokingly, but I have no doubt that's where Maharishi got the idea of ATRs. They come back to wait

out the rainy season, and while they're together, that's when they're doing a lot more practice than usual. So they'll meditate more, they do a puja every day, not only to the tradition but to the danda itself. They do a specific ritual to the stick itself, which is a constant reminder, almost like a Muslim praying five times a day. And they have strict rules of eating food and those kinds of observances. They'll often chant kirtan in the evening - no Netflix in the monastery!

Q. So no structure of further techniques. As was previously mentioned, Maharishi introduced Advanced Techniques, which were in addition to the mantra, and a variety of other techniques that he had. For instance, the techniques that Chopra taught and marma techniques.

A. Not that I know of. But one thing to understand is, the Dandis take the Bhagavad Gita seriously, and so when Krishna lays out the different yogas and then in Chapter 18, when Arjuna asked Krishna: "What should I do?", Krishna says basically: that's up to you. You've got a mind, use it. Make up your own mind. What are you attracted to?" Among the Dandis, they are definitely spiritual personality types. Some of them are very devotionally oriented. I knew some Dandis that were devoted to Lalita Ambika, and they did a lot of puja and a lot of kirtan and bhajan singing to Lalita Ambika. Dandis will over time put together a personal sadhana, as well as follow the requirements of their sect.

Q. Given what you understand, these other techniques that Maharishi brought out, they did not come through the Dandi tradition? I'm thinking here, let's say, Sidhis, Age of Enlightenment techniques, marma and so on, and the techniques that Chopra was asked to teach.

A. When you say Advanced Techniques, I was going back to when I was getting Advanced Techniques from Lillian Rosen and people like that. That's what I thought you meant, and I've never encountered that among Dandis but I wasn't looking for it so I have to give that proviso. When it comes to the Sidhis, I can say with some certainty that that's something he entirely made up himself.

Q. Now that Swarupananda is dead, who is the current Shankaracharya?

A. Yes, Swarupananda has died, but I met at least 25 years ago the man that's now replaced him. I could bore you with the details of the court cases, but first of all let me say the court didn't want to get involved because what authority does a secular court have in making a decision about the leader of a religion? That makes no sense. It breaks the separation of church and state, so the court said for years: "We want to stay out of it. We don't have anything to do with it."

Figure it out amongst yourselves." Since it wasn't getting figured out, and it went on and on and on, and new cases were brought from different angles, eventually the court came in on the grounds that the public trust is now being affected. You're creating a lot of confusion for the public by carrying on as you have all these decades.

By the way that has led to bloodshed in some cases. You may or may not know the Naga Babas are formed up in what are called akharas, extended brotherhoods, and one of these brotherhoods had aligned with Shantananda, and an akhara that was aligned with Swarupananda at one of the Kumba Melas they actually got into it. You may or may not know that they're the first to enter the Ganges during a Maha Kumba Mela. But among the Naga Babas, who can go in first? Since Allahabad is in the jurisdiction of the Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math, there was conflict and bloodshed. The Naga Babas are a warrior sect of sanyassins. Because the public trust had been broken, the court has become involved and the High Court at Allahabad has said: "You guys all claiming to be Shankaracharyas - and I said 'guys', but there's actually a sadhvi, a female aesthetic, from Nepal who claims she's the Shankaracharya, which is not even possible because only Brahmins and only males can become Dandis, and she's not either one - but anyway, the court has said: "Okay, nobody's a Shankaracharya", and they're leaving it to the Bharat Dharma Mahamandal to decide.

The Bharat Dharma Mahamandal, who originally picked Brahmananda, is on Swarupananda's side, so nobody in India or in the Nyayapeeths has any doubt that his appointee will be the Shankaracharya. He's been grooming him for 30 years, because he doesn't want there to be any ambiguity about who's following him on the gaddi. I've met that guy several times. Very knowledgeable, way outside my ability to judge in terms of knowledge of Sanskrit, of scripture. A very intelligent guy. We'll see how it works out. I'll be interested.

Q. Could you repeat what his name is again?

A. I thought you would ask me that, and since he's just been appointed, I wrote Nischalananda. You can find that very easily. If you looked up Swarupananda, it would be there.

Bryan Lee: I remember Maharishi putting a lot of money into promoting Shantananda. He bought him a very elaborate traveling bus to drive around, which of course increased his status. He was flying him around in planes from place to place, so he really gave a lot of emphasis to Shantananda for reasons which we can imagine.

Q. Is there something actually called the Holy Tradition, because from what you're saying it sounds like it's a bit unholy in places?

A. Well, there's the Yogi Berra effect - ideals and realities. But most definitely. The Shankara Sampradaya is very much alive and well, and the Shankaracharyas of the Nyayapeeths meet with some regularity to discuss policy. They have legions of pundits in their camps to adjudicate matters of orthodoxy and what have you. (I'm remembering now that it's not in Nischalananda that following Swarupananda, so you'll have to do a Google search to find him.) An interesting thing that's going on today is that the Shankaracharya of Puri is taking money from the government now, because the Shankaracharyaships are waning, and as they wane, they need support, and the government is willing to support them. They have cultural importance and religious importance, but the problem becomes if they take that money, then they're subject to certain requirements from the secular government. For instance, they must allow outcast people to come before them and enter their Maths, their monasteries. That's the tip of the iceberg of how this change is going on today.

Q. How are the Shankaracharyas respected, or even understood, in modern day India? Do they have the status that they used to have, particularly as India has become very much Westernized: the centre of all call centres for many countries?

A. Difficult to say how they were respected historically. Today, there's a cachet to that title. It doesn't have the kind of authority that the Pope has in Catholicism. First of all, not all Hindus are in the Shankara Sampradaya, but Hindus believe very firmly, popularly, in darshan. Nobody can get too much darshan. So if there are holy men and holy gals that are at events, people will come before them to have their blessing. Life can be hard in India, so they seek it out. If they've heard that name - Shankaracharya - and here comes a Shankaracharya on a gaddi being carried by people like a palanquin, then: "This must be an important person, I should get darshan." And they will come for it.

Q. As a group of people who have been committed to TM and related techniques for many decades now, some of us are comfortable where we are, others are looking for further progress, particularly since when I learned, I was going to be enlightened in five years. For those that are still seeking, based on your experience traveling in India and meeting these great sages, what would be your suggestions? What would you do in this situation?

A. I'm not I'm not really clear on the basic question

Q. The current TMO organization does not seem to instil a lot of confidence that they can keep us moving forward. We have a set of techniques, but for those that are still seeking and looking for something more, is there something that you've seen within India? Or assuming you have that same attitude, what would you do?

A. That's a big question. I've always been a Joseph Campbell "Follow your bliss" kind of guy. My primary sadhanas are loving my wife - happy wife, happy life! I live in the woods. I live in a cabin that has no electricity or running water, so I'm a chop wood, carry water kind of guy even at this age. Art and music lead me to the most wide-open places in my skull. So those are my personal sadhanas of choice. I studied with a Tibetan Buddhist lama for a very long time. I was his translator, so I had practiced a lot of Tonglen a lot of Shamatha, a lot of Metta meditation, and I use those sporadically. I come back to TM a lot, because I find it very restful. I enjoy it. I don't do the Sidhis anymore. That's my personal practice.

The TM movement has no authority whatsoever over you in terms of teaching. There's no way they can say: "Oh well, we're going to go to the actual tradition itself, the primary holders of what we ourselves are calling the Holy Tradition." Like: "I'm gonna go tell Mom on you if you keep teaching TM without our authority." They have no authority to do that at all. At all. I think that's a very important thing to know. They own the right to the trademark, to the name Transcendental Meditation, but that is not a name that the tradition itself would even recognize. They're more likely to say manasika mantra japa, mental repetition of mantra, or just dhyana, meditation.

I think that's very important for teachers to know that first of all there is a tradition of meditation in the Shankara Sampradaya. That's the one they learned, the original technique, and that they can give themselves personal authority to teach it. Let me just say I have no gripe with Maharishi. I left the movement. I just went on, I didn't leave in any kind of anger. In fact, I have a lot of sweet memories of Maharishi, and am grateful toward him for introducing me to Indian philosophy. I never knew what Advaita Vedanta was. I don't really take sides in the battle. I'll hold coats and let people go at.

Q. Moving forward, rather than exit stage left?

A. That's right. But it's important to know that in my experience at least, which is considerable with the Shankara Sampradaya, that if you want to teach TM and call it something else - which people are already doing - I'm grateful to you, because I do think it's a valuable technique, and I do think in a stressed-out world that people, if they find ways to go inside, if they find ways to get a little

peace and quiet in their head, why should that be discouraged? And shame on those that would discourage it.

Q. You use the word sadhana. What does that mean?

A. A spiritual practice. It could be anything, it could be chop wood, carry water.

Q. Going back to your previous description of what you are doing, could we summarize that as evolution through your action? You mentioned happy wife, happy life and the nature of how you conduct your life. This is a part of that spiritual practice for you?

A. Yes, I would say so. Ideally every minute of every day is an opportunity for sadhana.

Q. We've gone through such a hard-sell experience with Maharishi.

Enlightenment in two or three years, go to this course, pay this much money, thousands and thousands of dollars, techniques. Conformity at every turn, not individuality, not creativity. I actually heard Maharishi once say in a tape that he wanted people to keep the teaching pure, and that was a very narrow window for all of us. On some level we took that in, and to hear you mention someone like Joseph Campbell, it's like: "Oh no, we gave it all up". We gave up what we knew intuitively in our youth. We gave up what we were when we first came into this movement, which is every individual develops their own sadhana, their own profile, their own practice, based on their needs, their tastes, their evolution. It's an individually tailored thing. So the question is: what do we do now? Another technique? It really isn't about that. When you describe living off the grid, art, music, you like TM for the rest, but there's all these other things you do, it sounds so terribly balanced, so terribly common sense. Yet for someone like me, it's revolutionary and it's upsetting, because I could have known this if I didn't buy into this requirement that we couldn't really be ourselves. For someone like me, it was something I had to learn this hard way. But I feel like I sold myself short by judging myself all these years for not living in Fairfield, not being on Mother Divine, not being a full TM teacher. Everything else that I did was somehow lesser on a subconscious level. It's been like a low-grade fever for me this whole time, and so it's like a strange reclamation. I think we can each say to ourselves: "Wow, I guess I can do what I'm drawn to. I guess I can do what gives me Bliss, really follow my Bliss."

A. I'm glad you set yourself free. I'm really glad, and I celebrate that. A lot of us were around long, long ago, and I'll take you back in the time machine. I had all this youthful enthusiasm for the World Plan. I really saw myself as a World Plan initiator, and in 1971 at Amherst in a meeting that I was at - it was a media day,

and a reporter asked him how many followers he had - Maharishi said: "I don't have any followers. Each man follows the path of his own progress, and they found something here valuable, so they're still on the trail, ferreting out what works for them." Well, I was 20 years old and took that to heart. I remember Maharishi saying: "Just meditate twice a day, and do what you know is best." So that's what we did. We meditated regularly, and we took him to his word that we were on a very personal journey. And we expected in five to eight years to be, I don't know, living Buddhas or something. I felt okay, this is the thing for me, because it's based on direct experience. Nobody's telling me what my journey is, nobody's fencing me in. It had great appeal for me, I was a young hippie guy. And so this segue towards what kind of clothes you wear, you can be talked down to as you're compromising the Holy Tradition or the purity of the teaching - I'm happy to say I wasn't around for most of that, to whatever extent it was going on. I took Maharishi at his word, so I just kept following your bliss, follow your sadhana to your own Awakening.

Q. It's come out various reports - we have Judith Bourque's book, Susan Shumsky's book and the videos that we've been producing - which indicate that there was another side to Maharishi, not only in his actions, but potentially even his whole purpose. The critical thing that applies today is that those negative traits are still reflected in the TMO, the official TM organization.

A. About 25 years or more ago, a very close friend who had been a skin boy told me that he had walked in on Maharishi in the middle of the act, and that had been very shocking to him, and it had taken him a couple of years to come to even admit to his own mind that he had seen what he had seen. So when Judith's book came out - and I deeply respect Rob Gordon's word - I think the evidence is way too strong to doubt that these things happened. Now when it comes to the TMO, right now we seem to be seeing - and this was the research for this little book that I that I did for Cambridge University Press - several organizations are forming, and I think that's healthy. I think that once people realize they learned a technique that was a traditional Indian technique, and they can claim that they know one, then each person can be their own organization. Yoga teachers is a very good precedent for that. It's a traditional set of practices, it's a traditional sadhana, and maybe organizations will form in the same way that yoga practitioners will go to conferences and share knowledge. But I think if another monolith is going to come up that claims absolute authority, then it's going to be making the same mistakes, and it will not have any legitimation from the tradition in India.

Q. Could you see meditation teaching becoming a profession that does not have a strong alignment to - as in the TM organization - "The Holy Tradition", with the resulting intellectual property controls that we currently have with the TMO.

A. No, I don't think so. First of all, there's no proof that I've ever seen that Maharishi was charged with going to the West, or going anywhere, in teaching the technique that he had learned. I've never found any proof of that, and it's contrary to the tradition itself. So: "Did Maharishi go against the Holy Tradition?" would be a big question. Difficult to answer. Certainly, in terms of taking money - I don't care whether you call it a fee or a donation - just to take the money would be against the tradition.

Q. How do you see that working in the West, where we have to pay rent? If you're going to be a full-time teacher, we don't have a culture that supports that.

A. It's just like yoga teaching. In the West, it makes sense and people understand it. We don't have the same culture. We're not wandering swamis and sadhvis who the culture knows to take care of and give food on a daily basis. It makes sense in our culture that there would be a donation. But how big that donation is, and how it's done - very difficult for me to say what would be the best route.

Q. In the current TMO setup there are rajas, who basically look like kings. They have golden crowns. They created a central bank, issued their own money and they've attempted to acquire land to set up a sovereign nation. This is all public information. What do you think this has to do with the Holy Tradition, or anything you have researched? Does it fit into their scheme of things? Is it something foreign to it? And have you heard of anybody in any kind of spiritual tradition in India wearing golden crowns? I'm thinking specifically of the Holy Tradition picture which everybody has seen. I see no crowns, no golden crowns, and I don't see them waving their Ram Raj currency. Would you like to comment if you've ever encountered anything like this in your Indian studies?

A. No.

Q. When you went through these experiences of learning to meditate with all these different people in India, this effortless transcending, were there any similarities to what we call the steps of initiation? To me they're so beautiful and precise, and worked so nicely. I'm just wondering what similarities you experienced?

A. Yeah, there were similarities, sometimes more than others. When George and I learned from Swarupananda, I remember us chatting about: "Did you see the way he delivered the mantra? And then checked to see if we were repeating the mantra?" And yet in that case, it didn't end with us meditating by ourselves silently and then checking in after. He's a Shankaracharya, so there were people that really wanted to see him, and he was spending a lot of time with us because one of his primary pundits is an old friend of mine. Because it was a long time, he didn't have us meditate silently alone, which I had done with other Dandis. So sometimes there were, sometimes there were not.

Q. How will, or could, teaching people to teach change? There's so many different ways that you expressed that people were being taught the meditation. Does it even require at this point to be taught how to teach?

A. If we want to entertain this idea - that we know Maharishi was a brahmachari, he was taught this way, he wasn't authorized to teach but he did teach, he gave himself authority - then in the Indian tradition, they would say: "Do what you were taught." If you're going to teach, pass on what you were taught, so you're in that parampara. They would say: "Teach what you were taught to teach." That will be the best way to approach the situation.

Q. So it would be important to follow the tradition, the lineage?

A. One of the difficult things about this is if you understand how organic Hinduism is. Out the window I'm looking right now at an apple tree. The apples that come off that tree, if we plant those seeds, won't be the exact same apples. In other words, the tree is iterating itself in a new way and I'm trying to use this as a metaphor for what often happens in India. A person will be initiated by a guru, and then they will alter the way that they teach it a little bit. They're still in a parampara, but they're iterating it, and in some sense they make it their own. Sibylle said that she found that there were ways of speaking out of her own truth, and feeling like: "I'm trying to help someone, and I've opened to a larger perspective on experience. It will be more useful in this particular case if I don't use the puja, or if I do use the puja." In India, that's what they do. Whether they should do it or not, who's to judge such things? These iterations will occur, and I think part of the thing that happened with the TMO was: No, it's got to be exactly, exactly, exactly as Maharishi passed it on. That's a shift way away from the mainstream tradition in India, good or bad. That's just a big shift away.

Q. You've used the word Hinduism. I don't think many of us see ourselves as teaching Hinduism. We're teaching a technique that has come out of Hinduism.

Do you see it appropriate, this apple tree change that you talk about, that we bring this knowledge, this information, and bring it into a Westernized tradition, which I would see as a professional one. For doctors there are medical schools, and you can choose which medical school you go to, but then you practice as a doctor. I would see it appropriate that we create our own teacher training institutions, which people can choose, and then adopt that role as a professional in teaching transcendence. Is that a step too far from your point of view?

A. Well, that's an iteration. That's what I'm talking about. I think it's important to recognize that if we look at the SCI course, for example, that was a crash course in Advaita Vedanta. It was the philosophy of the Shankara Sampradaya specifically. Inside the academic study of religion there is a phenomenological approach to what is the definition of religion, based on characteristics of behaviour and thought. So if you look at the characteristics of behaviour and thought in the TMO, if it looks like a bear and it walks like a bear and it eats like a bear, it's probably a bear. Phenomenologically looking at what they teach, how they teach it and how they practice, there's a whole section of Hinduism that has been lifted right out and transplanted. And if you think of the Buddha Dharma, as it went from India to China it iterated, as it went from China to Japan it iterated and accommodated itself to its new cultures. The dharma of the Shankara Sampradaya is iterating. So to be able to hold on to the legitimization of the Shankara Sampradaya and somehow claim that you're not Hindu, that would cause cognitive disconnect in me personally.

Q. We have a a great resource of videotapes, audio tapes and other writings of Maharishi. Given what we now know, how much validity can we put to this resource?

A. In terms of Maharishi Ayurveda and this sort of thing, you'll remember that Chopra left because he was very disgruntled about Maharishi's claim that their iteration of Ayurveda was the purest, and Chopra didn't think so. Chopra said we're claiming expertise over what the Ayurvedic physicians in India themselves claim. He felt very, very uncomfortable with that. I'm no Ayurvedic practitioner, and I can't judge which was more accurate or less accurate. When the other pieces came along, I personally was surprised by all that. I felt why add in all these yagyas, and all these Hindu elements that are off-putting to the public? As a World Plan initiator that was antithetical to my purposes. I wanted to stay on track with the original plan, and I know a lot of my friends did as well, so it was quite a segue away from that.

Q. I guess doubts are raised because we see from others who have expertise in Vastu and in Ayurveda that if Maharishi was making wrong claims there, was he making wrong claims around the core technology, the core Vedic knowledge and understanding?

A. The teaching that Maharishi was passing on was pretty much just straightforward Advaita Vedanta. Elements that were added in from Yoga Sutras, for example, and Tantra, they're not segues away from Advaita Vedanta, they were already in Advaita Vedanta. Both yoga philosophy, Sankhya philosophy, Tantra, the Agama texts, that was all there before. Shankara was aware of that information, and built it into his in translations of the Gita, the Brahma Sutras and the Upanishads. So Maharishi was passing on a legitimate understanding of Advaita Vedanta, and the technique that he was passing along that he learned from Brahmananda was the technique that Dandis commonly pass along.

The bigger questions for me personally were centered on effectiveness. Somewhere along the line after 15 years of twice-a-day practice and several ATRs and a six-month Teacher Training and the Sidhi program, I realized, okay, maybe I am just a blockhead, but if I'm not a blockhead, then this technique is no more effective than the Tonglen practice of Tibetan Buddhists, or the Shamatha practice of Theravada Buddhists. For all I know, all the rest of you are awakened bodhisatvas just here to check my math, but I'm not enlightened. So I had to let go of a lot of hubristic sensibility around the effectiveness of even the basic technique. So maybe I'm the wrong person to ask about effectiveness. I like it, I do it with some regularity because I enjoy it, but I do other things also and more prominently.

Q. I guess people are looking for certainty as to what in this whole body of knowledge that we have acquired by our involvement with Maharishi and the organizations that he created is correct, and at what point did things veer off into an area that had uncertainty?

A. I'm not qualified to help you with the veering offs. I'm not an expert in Ayurveda or Jyotish or yagyas or Vastu, and on a personal level I'm not even particularly interested. But in terms of the TM technique and manasika mantra japa, he was passing along something that is part of the tradition. I think I can say that with some certainty. And he was passing along a body of knowledge that is most certainly a variety of Indian philosophy.

Q. And the TM Sidhis?

A. No, I've never seen that kind of a practice in India before, ever. There again, did anybody ever fly? I don't think so. I don't think they ever did, and so in terms of its effectiveness, I question that personally.

Q. That's a very central point, because huge emphasis was put on the Sidhis, and people were practicing them for hours every day. Maharishi claimed to have cognized the technique for implementing Patanjali's knowledge, Patanjali's sutras, implementing them in practice with what he called the technique of sanyama. If that doesn't exist in India, then we have to decide for ourselves whether Maharishi's cognition was coming from a very profound level of enlightenment.

A. Isn't sanyama itself right in the sutras? I think it is. But the claims that the practice would speed up growth toward awakening, and that it would help create superradiance - I don't even know what yardsticks we would use. They tried to do the studies of crime rates, but most of that's been challenged.

Q. Yeah, Patanjali talks about dharana, dhyana and samadhi as being the technique, but what dharana, dhyana and samadhi actually consists of, we have to depend on Maharishi for that, it seems.

A. Yes, and even in the tradition among Dandis I've heard different interpretations of both of those.

Q. I was actually at the Maha Kumbha Mela [Hindu festival] in January 1997 in the city of Allahabad. One evening I went to the Shankaracharya Swami Shantananda's ashram and I dared to ask for a mantra diksha, so I got initiated by him. He wrote on a small piece of paper a basic mantra then I thought "Wow, I have an extension of my mantra", so I closed my eyes and directed it to him, and he said "Hmm!" And he took back the piece of paper and he wrote a longer extension on that mantra, and that extension was "Namah". So that answers a question about if there are extensions of some of these mantras that some Shankaracharyas give.

A. You may be right. Like I said, I wasn't trying to make an exhaustive study I didn't ask about advanced techniques.

Q. My question goes to how the Dandi swamis regard the mantras in the aura of secrecy that Maharishi seemed to imbue them with. He said these are top secret practices which are passed from heart to heart, but here in the West we have things like Alain Daniélou's 'Myths and Gods of India', where he discusses the mantras. we have Thomas Ashley-Farrand's book, and of course David Frawley's exhaustive book, where he goes into all the intuitive feelings of each

component letter of the mantras and what they do. My whole approach to TM just on the level of the pure technique was always with great reverence and an intuitive feeling for the intuitive invocatory power of the sounds, so my question for you is: do the Dandi swamis hold these mantras as great secrets, or are they widely known? In this chat today, some people have said they were initiated by certain swamis who asked them: "Is there a particular aspect of the Hindu godhead to which you feel devoted?", and then they would give them the mantra for that. Maharishi didn't go into any of this. He gave us a very simplistic version. Do the Dandi swamis regard these as great secrets, and you're supposed to just reverently receive whatever they give you? Or is it well known in the tradition, for example, what parts of the Hindu godhead the various mantras are connected with? And is it more on a level of a choice, like an ishtadevata you feel drawn to?

A. That's a good question. Again, I wasn't making an exhaustive inquiry into any of this mantra choice when I was with the Dandi swamis. I was investigating their monastic structure and their allegiances to gurus and Shankaracharyas. Saying that, I know quite a lot about Indian tradition, and you have to remember that if you read Manu, and you read other smriti texts like the Laws of Manu, then you find out that the Brahmins in the Brahmanical period were keeping Sanskrit very secret. It was forbidden for low castes and outcasts to learn Sanskrit. It was forbidden for women to learn Sanskrit. People have made the argument that the Brahmins were watching out for their own best interests, and so they were very protective of the language. Not just because of its sonic properties, relative to your comment and the value of the sounds and maintaining the purity of that language, but also to make a living. They were the performers of the ceremonies, and if you wanted a puja "Hey, how about something for the trouble?" And that goes on in India to this day. So there is some secretness on that level, and then also when an initiation takes place. When a Brahmin boy is going through his upanayana ceremony to receive the sacred thread, then most commonly the guru will put a shawl over their heads, or take the boy in a separate room, and whisper into his ear the first mantras that he will learn. These are usually from Rig Veda. And so there is this element of secrecy in the culture itself.

When I'm dealing with the Dandis, there wasn't a lot of secrecy going on. Like the fellow in Sweden said a moment ago, Shantananda wrote his mantra down on a piece of paper. In my field notes I've probably got six or eight of those kind of notes, where the mantra was written down and given to me. Maharishi told us never to write the mantra down. So that's interesting. When Swarupananda initiated George and I, he gave us a printed placard, very beautiful with a picture of him on it, with space to write our mantras down. So in the tradition

it's not secret at all, really. And just as you say, when they're asking for an ishtadevata, the swami will give them: "What's your ishtadevata? Do this." And they'll have a private moment with them. But ishtadevata mantras are everywhere. They're written on the side of rickshaws. They're not some big carefully guarded secret. And if that person went away and somebody said: "Well, what mantra did he give you?", then I have no doubt that the person would tell him what the mantra was, and that the Dandi wouldn't mind. I never got any vibe to the contrary.

Gary Benner: A very great thank you for joining us today and sharing your experience. I think it's clarified so many questions that many of us have had, particularly in the last couple of years as this group has had an open conversation about matters pertaining to our roles as a teacher, our work in passing on the technology of transcendence, and trying to get rid of things that have become either wrongfully told to us, or urban myths that have caused confusion against our own inner sense, or common sense, of what should be.

Dana Sawyer: Well, I applaud you for that. You're welcome for whatever insight I could help you with. I applaud that you're open-minded. I applaud that you've set yourself free like my friend in (State), that you're willing to entertain these questions after what in many cases for a lot of people I gather have been years and years of not questioning, of assuming that they could trust and keeping their feet inside. It's a part of the human condition that human beings love certainty, and they like to know "The Truth", and one of the bugaboos of knowing the truth is that you're no longer seeking the truth. One of the things that I did see in the many interviews that we did for the little book for Cambridge was people who came to recognize that they were living in an echo chamber. There were a group of concepts that they had taken in that self-reinforce to create certainty, in that every question had an answer. But they hadn't recognized that just because a philosophical position has an answer to every question doesn't make it right, it makes it self-reinforcing. To break out of that bubble, and to be able to be honest with yourself, and if you really want to grow spiritually, how can you grow spiritually? Where's the growth in already knowing everything? it's like trying to eat once and for all. So I applaud what you're doing, asking honest questions.

Phil Goldberg and I a few years ago thought we might have a TM homecoming at the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health, and we wanted to do something similar to what you're launching, which is: "Can we all sit down and say this was a part of our life. What was its significance? What should we keep? What should we

throw out? How do we heal old wounds? So for those of you that are doing that honestly and with integrity, I salute that.

Phil Goldberg: I should add that we were urged to cease and desist by the TMO and so we never did have that that weekend reunion.

Dana Sawyer: They wouldn't allow an open conversation. They would decide who could speak and what they would say.

Bryan Lee: I feel impelled to express my own deep appreciation, deep gratitude for this talk today. It's really been liberating and brought out many things that I wish I'd known 40 years ago, but I think it's a starting point, and I'm sure there are so many people who'd love to have you back again sometime. There'd be so many questions. So a thousand thanks.

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Prof. Dana Sawyer's new book, *The Perennial Philosophy Reloaded: A Guide for the Mystically Inclined Paperback* – July 9, 2024, is available on Amazon at:

https://www.amazon.com/Perennial-Philosophy-Reloaded-Mystically-Inclined/dp/1958972290/ref=sr_1_1?dib=eyJ2IjojMSJ9.7Y2VeB14FJtpiNV0CLEZhQyQ5I9PlhdH5v1jG0jD1cAJYMXQYubbnmJ4Hq1Q6AeBO0zPU_jk0nzjHJQJ79URe3tGmSfbXvHHihlVbr_29c-YGmcbZjLfvuMoSYyWZRmf9Zs5cONeIA8wHWQh-uO8B3Z9fPmUqITxpfv9M9Im5M.oPkQJW_XDaszvs8lhV0UHNWvsGhVqaqv5V04pOixdLE&dib_tag=se&keywords=Dana+Sawyer&qid=1720040012&sr=8-1